

Austria's new ÖVP-Green government: united in diversity?



Austria's new coalition government, incorporating the conservative ÖVP and the Green Party, was sworn in on 7 January. [Paul Schmidt](#) writes that the two parties have so far expressed a desire to find working compromises between their competing priorities. However, the rest of Europe will be watching with interest to see if their partnership remains sustainable in the long-term.

Like it or not, we live in interesting times. This undoubtedly holds true for Austrian politics, where a new governing coalition between the conservative ÖVP and the Green Party just took office. The coalition is a new experience for Austria and will present some notable challenges for the two essentially dissimilar coalition partners. The new government has already raised substantial international interest.

Both parties found success in the [snap elections](#) that took place in September last year, following the early breakup of the previous government formed by the ÖVP and the right-wing Freedom Party (FPÖ). While the ÖVP managed to collect 37.5% of the vote, a gain of 6%, the Greens gathered a vote share of 13.9%, an additional 10.1% compared to 2017. For the Greens, who have so far gained executive know-how only at the regional level, forming part of a governing coalition on the federal level is a new and unexpected development.

Just two years ago, for the first time since entering the Austrian Parliament in 1986, the Greens failed to pass the threshold of 4% in the 2017 legislative elections, causing enormous frustration, and tremendous financial and existential stress for the party. But times have changed. The Greens succeeded in renewing its leadership and managed to ride the growing wave of concern over climate change, which overtook migration as a top priority for voters. They performed relatively well in the 2019 European elections as well as in two subsequent regional elections.

There were essentially two green motives to enter government. The first one is related to its *raison d'être*. To effectively tackle climate challenge, it is necessary to seize the opportunity to take up responsibility and move from the legislative arena to the executive. The second reason for joining the coalition was to avoid a continuation of an ÖVP-FPÖ coalition, which they deemed to be damaging for the country.

For the ÖVP, on the other hand, the two main strategic drivers after having lost the FPÖ as a partner due to internal turmoil and a disappointing election result, were the new prominence of the climate issue and the idea of striking a deal with the other 'winner' from the election. As a minority government would not have been feasible, the new coalition was probably considered the only real option left. Limited political leverage for the Greens to set the overall agenda was obviously another factor, and their proposals for an eco-social market economy were helpful in finding common ground.



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Judging from its coalition agreement, the new government is geared toward proactive pragmatism and compromise. There is a sense of continuity when it comes, for instance, to asylum and migration policies, but also of evolution rather than revolution regarding issues like the fight against climate change. On European integration, the agreement reached does strike a different chord compared with former governmental accords. The new coalition sketches out a constructive role to contribute to European solutions and wants to support the EU in becoming a stronger global player. It emphasises the importance of a value and rule based European integration process built on solidarity and responsibility.

The government stresses its determination to become a frontrunner in climate protection and sets an ambitious goal of achieving carbon neutrality by 2040. It pushes for a new mechanism regarding the implementation of the rule of law in EU member states. Rejecting the current Mercosur agreement, it would like to reform comprehensive EU-trade agreements with a special emphasis on environmental, social, and food standards. It wants to fight social dumping, advocates a new digital strategy and supports the remaining Western Balkan countries on their EU accession path. Subsidiarity is no longer seen as a “guarantee against centralism”, but as a means toward a more efficient distribution of competences between the European and the national levels. Not to mention that the government has set a goal of sending every teenager aged between 15 and 19 for a week to Brussels to gain personal experience of the EU.

The government is also pushing for a new EU-treaty which would reduce the size of the European Commission, grant the European Parliament the right to initiate legislation and implement a single parliamentary seat. It is also aiming to increase qualified majority voting in the Council to raise efficiency in decision making. There are other key areas which seem to have been deliberately left out of the coalition agreement, such as the next financial framework. However, it is clear that the government does not seem particularly keen on becoming an even more prominent net contributor to the EU budget after Brexit.

The first days in office have already painted a picture of two unequal partners with rather different priorities in search of a sensible balance. Both will dedicate their efforts toward striking a compromise between ecology and the economy, but in the end, what is written on paper will be of little consequence and only the implementation will matter in the long run. The new governing coalition is something of an experiment – not only for Austria – and the rest of Europe will be watching to see the results.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics.

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